



# Early Days in the Klondike

## A MONUMENT TO A MAN OF GOD

### « A Man Full of Charity »

The visitor to the Dawson City Gold Rush Festival, comfortably lodged in the Klondike Tent City at the foot of the bare-faced mountain in the north end of the town of Dawson might be a little intrigued by the simple and lonely white monument standing on the bank of the mighty Yukon, marking the place where are buried the last remains of a priest by the name of Father Wm. H. Judge. The latin inscription on the white memorial stone reads; « Here lies the body of Father Wm. H. Judge, S.J., a man full of charity, who, with the co-operation of all, here first erected a house for the sick and a temple for God; and who, being mourned by all, died piously in the Lord, the 16th of January, 1899 ».

Whilst hundreds of people hungry for gold and riches were feverishly burning their way through frozen muck and boulders in search of the ever illusive gold, this devoted priest seemed to be living in another world while his hands were busy putting together a hospital that would bring comfort to broken bodies, and a church that would bring the peace of God to their disillusioned souls. It is a little ironical that this man who never staked a claim, and never washed a pan of gold, is today one of the few who are still remembered as the great of the Klondike Gold Rush days.

Father Judge had been at Fortymile hardly a

year when news reached this mining post in Alaska that rich deposits of gold had been found on one of the creeks up the Yukon River. Father Judge was quick in seeing the implications once the news would reach the outside world. Hardly four months after the famous discovery on Bonanza, Father Judge had already secured three acres of land in the townsite of Dawson to erect a church and a hospital.

For several weeks already, the miners at Forty-mile had been making dogs, sleighs and equipment ready for their departure for the new gold fields on the Troandik, as the Klondike was then known. Many indeed were on their way, fearing to arrive too late. In the meantime Father Judge was torn between his duty to remain at Fortymile to minister to the few who stayed behind, and his desire to go to Dawson to begin his work of charity. At last, around the middle of March, 1897, he decided to leave for the Klondike. He began loading his sleigh, and with what? Forgetting his own welfare, he packed boxes of medicines, salves and bandages, his Mass-kit, and hardly enough food to last him for a week. This trip of the Missionary to the scene of his future labours was thus touchingly depicted in the « Klondike Nugget » two days after his death; « The stampedeers from Fortymile to the Klondike in the winter of '96-97 remember overtaking a solitary and feeble old man with a single sled rope over his shoulders, and a single dog helping the lead dog along. This was the Father hastening to a field where he was conscious his ministering services were most required ».

From the day he arrived until his premature death only some twenty months later, Father Judge spent himself totally, without any regard for his own well-being, for the care of bodies and souls of his fellow men. His first concern was the building

of a hospital which was ready for occupancy by August 20th, 1897.

- He had expected the Sisters of St. Ann to be there for the grand opening of this log building, 20'x50', and two stories high, with walls lined with muslin sized and coated with white lead. But the water on the Yukon being too low for the passage of the boat on which the sisters were traveling, they had to turn back from Fort Yukon and winter at Holy Cross. It was only in July of 1898 that our missionary and all the people of Dawson had the joy of welcoming to Dawson the Sisters of St. Ann. These good Sisters have been in Dawson ever since, ministering to the sick and teaching school to our children.

### **First Oblates in the Yukon**

With the stampede to the Klondike taking momentum as the months went by, it did not take long for the religious authorities to recognize that more missionaries would be needed. Accordingly, in May of 1898, Father E. GENDREAU, was appointed by Bishop GROUARD, superior of the missions of the Yukon. His first assistants were Father LEFEBVRE, Father DESMARAIS, Father Corbeil, a secular priest, and Brother DUMAS.

The first to arrive in Dawson was Father Lefebvre; his arrival was most providential as the week previous St. Mary's Church burnt to the ground. It happened early in the morning of Trinity Sunday, June 5th. Late Saturday night Fr. Judge was saying his prayers by candlelight when he was called to the bedside of a sick patient. In his eagerness to help the sick, he omitted to extinguish the candle which, before he returned, burnt down to its wooden support and set fire to

the church. In the fire, Fr. Judge lost all he needed to say Mass. This is why his heart must have leaped with joy when only a week later Fr. Lefebvre arrived, carrying with him a portable altar. A large tent was set up, and in it the two priests conducted the services until the church could be rebuilt. This consolation was not long delayed, as Mr. Alex McDonald, the Klondike King, offered to pay the whole cost.

Father Gendreau arrived toward the end of June, 1898, and took charge of the whole of the church work of the district, which he divided up into different missions. Father Corbeil was given charge of Dominion and Hunker; Father Desmarais of Bonanza, Eldorado and Sulphur; Father Lefebvre was sent to Selkirk to build a chapel there with the assistance of Brother Dumas. He returned from Selkirk to be assistant at St. Mary's and at the same time was given charge of Last Chance.

The first temples of worship on the creeks were very modest. They were tents, simply shelters for the worshippers from the rigors of the climate. But it was not very long before the missionaries, with the help of their people, began building more worthy houses of worship. Thus by summer of 1902 we count six churches on the creeks, besides the beautiful and spacious St. Mary's Church in Dawson. They are; St. Patrick's on Hunker Creek, St. Peter's on Last Chance, St. Andrew's on Sulphur, Church of the Holy Family on Dominion Creek, and St. Joseph's on Lover Dominion.

With the mechanization of gold mining, all these centres of population became deserted, and with the departure of the people, the churches were closed and later demolished. Parts of one of these churches, such as windows, pews, altar bell, were used for the present Christ the King church in Mayo, which was built in 1935.

## Passing of a Man of God

From the ruins of June 5th, rose a beautiful church which was dedicated on August 21st, 1898, by Father Judge himself, assisted by the Oblate Father. After the dedication of the church Father Judge turned its full responsibility to the Oblate Fathers, keeping for himself the chaplaincy of the hospital and the care of the sick. Now, it seems, would have been the time for this wornout priest to allow himself the rest he had so badly been in need of for the last few months. But no, eternity would be long enough for him to rest. Now was the time to work. Strict orders he gave to the good sisters and his staff at the hospital to call him whenever he might be wanted by any patient, no matter how unreasonable or irrational the demand for his presence, and then suddenly, only a week after he had said his first Mass in the new chapel he had built for the hospital, he went to bed himself - to die. It was January 16, 1899. Then came the question of where he should be buried. It was decided that since he had given all of himself for the welfare of his people, it would be only fitting that he be buried on the very ground that he had chosen for his corporal and spiritual ministrations. His good friend, Fr. E. Gendreau, officiated at the uneral. Following is the recording he made of it in the church records: « The 20th of January, 1899, in presence of a great concourse of people composed of the most respectable citizens of this town without regard to nationality or creed, we the undersigned Parish Priest have buried under the gospel side of the altar of this church the remains of the late Rev. Rr. Wm. H. Judge, S.J., first Pastor and Founder of this church and St. Mary's Hospital, who died on the 16th of this month at the age of 49 years ». This act of burial is followed by the signatures of

231 of the witnesses at the funeral. Wrote the Klondike Nugget the next day: «The esteem in which the benevolent Father was so universally held, is well attested by the great throng which assembled to witness the last sad ceremony ».

### **First Recognized School in the Yukon**

Now that the sick had their hospital and the people their church, the missionaries could divert their energies to other needs of the people. It did not take long for Father Gendreau to observe that although the number of school age children kept increasing daily, no one seemed to be in a mood to provide them with an education. After having secured the assistance of the Sisters of St. Ann, he opened St. Mary's School on the 1st of November, 1899, with an enrollment of 45, in a building situated on corner of 1st Ave. and 9th St., that is on a lot adjoining the church and hospital complex. Rev. Sister Mary Joseph Calasanz, assisted by Miss Mamie O'Connor was the first teacher and principal of this school. On February 13, 1900, Commissioner Ogilvie and Mr. Justice Dugas made an official visit to the school; finding it satisfactory in every respect, Commissioner Ogilvie officially approved the school. Thus St. Mary's school became the first officially recognized school in the Yukon.

Thanks to the ceaseless efforts of its missionaries, after only three years of existence, the Catholic Church was solidly established in the Klondike region when, in August 1900, Bishop Grouard made his first official visit to Dawson. Bishop Grouard then Bishop of the whole of Athabaska, the Mackenzie and the Yukon came to Dawson from the Mackenzie over the old trail. While in Dawson he visited all the creeks, and also administered the Sacrament of Confirmation.

The following year Father Gendreau had St. Mary's Church completely renovated, and added a pipe organ. The work was barely finished when another distinguished visitor arrived on a visit. Archbishop A. LANGEVIN of St. Boniface. During his visit he preached a very successful retreat and administered the Sacrament of Confirmation. It was during this visit that Archbishop Langevin blessed the bell which is still in use in our church. Records of this important event read as follows: The 23rd of June, 1901. We, the undersigned Archbishop of St. Boniface have blessed with the prescribed form under the name of Maria one bell for the church of this parish, weighing one thousand, one hundred and fifty pounds, presented by the citizens whose names are cast on said bell, and who stood as sponsors at the blessing of the bell.

#### **1902: Breynat Bishop of Mackenzie/Yukon**

The diocese of Bishop Grouard being much too vast for one man to administer efficiently, it was subdivided, and on April 6, 1902, Bishop BREYNAT was consecrated in Edmonton as first Bishop of the Mackenzie and Yukon. On October 4th of the same year Bishop Breynat arrived in Dawson for a visit which was productive of a great deal of good and appreciated by all. At the occasion of this visit we read the following in Vol. II, no. 4 of the « Yukon Catholic » published in Dawson: « His (Bishop Breynat's) arrival in this city, which has the honour of being the Episcopal seat, marked an important epoch in the history of the church in the north ». Following is an excerpt from the reply of Bishop Breynat to address of welcome by Mayor Macaulay; « You have erected a magnificent church that is an honor to your religion and a proof of your generosity as well as of your faith. Your school

and hospital are institutions that would do honor to many a city several times as old and as large as Dawson. The fame of your choir has travelled far... The short time in which your Church paper has attained a high degree of excellence proves that your intellectual activity is not inferior to your energy and progressiveness in things temporal ».

And so, only five years after Father Judge moved his medicines and Mass-kit to Dawson from Forty-mile, the Catholic Church was well established in Dawson, with a worthy temple of worship, a home for the sick, a school for the children, and even a monthly Catholic Paper. Such a rapid growth in so short a time in a district separated by thousands of miles from the civilized world is due largely to the energy and vision of our first missionaries who were helped by their devoted people and blessed by blessed by God in all their efforts.

A new Parish Priest arrived in Dawson on June 4th, 1902, to replace Father Gendreau who had been appointed Parish Priest at Rat Portage. On that bright June day, when Father E.M. BUNOZ, was warmly welcomed in his new parish by its missionaries and the people, the remotest thing from his mind was the thought that in the not too distant a future he would be called upon by his Church to supervise all the church work in northern B.C. and all of the Yukon as it's first resident Bishop. But for the present he was mostly concerned in doing the will of God and fulfilling the needs of the church in his new parish.

This energetic priest was not slow in recognizing that with the fast development of Dawson as the metropolis of the north, a better and larger school should be built. He acquired lots on the corner of 5th and King St., and erected there a fine building which is still in use today. The new St. Mary's



school building opened its doors in September of 1904. In addition to the standard academic course, a music school and a commercial course were opened. The latter had to be abandoned at the time of World War I.

### **Bunoz Heads Prince-Rupert/Yukon**

In 1908 the vast vicariate of the Mackenzie and the Yukon was subdivided again, and the Parish Priest of Dawson, Very Rev. Fr. E.M. Bunoz, was named the first Prefect Apostolic of the new Prince Rupert, B.C., and Yukon vicariate. Fr. Bunoz continued to administer this new mission vicariate from Dawson for many years. He was consecrated Bishop on October 18, 1917, and from then until his death in June of 1945 he directed the work of his diocese from Prince Rupert. In his declining years he was given the help of a coadjutor in the person of Very Reverend J.L. COUDERT, who was consecrated Bishop on June 7th, 1936. In 1944 the Yukon was separated from the vicariate of Prince Rupert and became what is known today as the vicariate of Whitehorse with Bishop Coudert as its first Bishop. A note of interest here is that when Bishop Coudert elected Whitehorse as his episcopal seat, Dawson City was still Capital of the Yukon. His foresight had told him that eventually Whitehorse would become the centre of administration for the whole of the Yukon. History has proven him right.

This brief survey of the early days of the church in Dawson would not be complete without saying a few words about the monument marking the grave of its founder. It appears that with the decline of Dawson which began around 1910, the big church in the north end of town began to be used less and less. Between 1911 and 1922 it was used only in the

summer months, of for special occasions like Christmas. The present school and church building which had been erected in 1904 being more centrally located was more convenient and so, its chapel, on the second floor above the school, became, for the winter months, the parish church. Finally the break with the old church came in May of 1923 when Father Rivet assisted by Mr. Tremblay undertook to demolish it. Many of the furnishings were moved in the present church, such as the altar, the tall crucifix above the altar, the statues, the sanctuary lamp, and the communion rail. The following year the bell tower was added to the present church, and on September 27, 1924, the half a ton bell blessed by Bishop Langevin in 1901 was solidly installed in place. For over 60 years this bell has proclaimed our faith in God, and may it continue for many years to come to remind us of our gratitude to God for the innumerable favors He has showered upon us.

Father Edmond TURENNE O.M.I.

*Parish Priest*